

# The Catholic Church And Women

By L. H. Lehmann

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*[This is the fifth of a series of articles on "The True Nature and Structure of Roman Catholicism." It will be followed next month by an article on "The Catholic Church and Science."]*

ALL RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS ruled by priestcraft have subordinated women to a state inferior to that of men and used them as a means to power. Woman, in their teachings, had no true soul, and was regarded as the mere material counterpart of man who alone was believed to ascend to the higher mental and spiritual planes. Man represented mind, woman the matter of the universe.

This pagan philosophy of the relationship of the sexes considered woman as evil, since all matter was taught as coming from the 'world of darkness.' It thus can easily be seen how this denial of spiritual rights to women served the double purpose of making women the mere plaything of men in sexual matters and labor slaves of them for economic ends.

Had the true teaching of Christ been persevered in, it would have put an end to this slave relationship of woman to man. But it was not, with the result that much of the pagan philosophy and practice of pre-Christian religions was carried over into the Christian church almost from the beginning. How much of it persists to this day in the Roman Catholic church, even in democratic America, may be judged from the following:

1. There is at present in the United States a vast unpaid army of more than 138,000 women in Roman Catholic convents. These, by the rules of the church, are denied the right of motherhood, are bound by unquestioning, "corpse" obedience to the dictates of superiors, are not allowed to possess money or property of their own, must dress in medieval garments, are known only by names different from that of their families, and the profit of their labor and learning goes exclusively to the up-building of the church's organization.
2. No woman in the Roman Catholic church is permitted to become a preacher or a priest, the first requisite of which is the 'male sex.' Women are thus deprived of the special benefits that are believed to accompany the priesthood.
3. No woman, not even a nun, is allowed to take part in the rites and ceremonies within the sanctuary, or altar rails, of any Roman Catholic church.
4. After childbirth a woman is regarded as unclean by the Roman Catholic church, and is forbidden entrance into a church until she is purified, or "churched," by a priest in the vestibule.<sup>1</sup>

5. The state of virginity is decreed in Roman Catholic theology as being superior to that of marriage. But virginity in a woman is never taken for granted and must always be proved. A man, on the other hand, is always presumed to be a virgin until he gets married.

### Early Monastic Ideas Of Women

This Manichean teaching, that woman belongs to matter and the world of darkness, and man to the world of mind and light, was fostered to a fantastic extent by the early "Fathers" of the Christian church. Obsessed with sexual desire and yet determined to live a sexless life, they made hatred of woman almost a dogma. "The touch of a woman," St. Jerome wrote, "is as much to be dreaded as the bite of a mad dog." Yet he confesses, in his letter To Eustochium:<sup>2</sup>

"Oh how often, when I was living in the desert... did I fancy myself surrounded by the pleasures of Rome... I often found myself surrounded by bands of dancing girls."

Tertullian (De Cultu Feminarum, I, 1) writes:

"Do you know that each of you women is an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age; the guilt must necessarily live too. You are the devil's gateway; you are the temptress of the forbidden tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law."

St. Clement of Alexandria (Paedagogica, II) expresses a like opinion of women:

"To woman it brings shame even to reflect of what nature she is."

St. Gregory Thaumaturgus (*Metaphrases in Ecclesiasten*, VII, 28), honored as "the miracle worker" by the Catholic church today, expresses his venom against women as follows:

"Moreover, among all women I sought for chastity proper to them, and I found it in none. In truth; a person may find one man chaste among a thousand, but a woman never."

These early "Fathers" have contributed largely to the basic teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic church today. What they taught about women differs very little from what is preached by priests in twentieth-century America. The N. Y. Times of July 2, 1945, quoted a condemnation of women by Msgr. Flannelly of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, that equals anything from St. Jerome or Tertullian. Headlining its column: "*Priest Bids Women Mend 'Evil Ways;' Wives Sharply Scolded; Lack 'Slightest Conception of Sanctity of Married State,' Churchman Declares,*" the Times went on to say:

"He charged married women with not having 'the slightest conception of the seriousness and sanctity of the married state or of the solemn duty and privilege of motherhood,' and then added: 'But this is to be expected. Where there is lust before marriage, there is bound to be lust afterward.'

"Too many women, 'ignoring the heinousness of sin,' have degraded womanhood, he said, and continued: 'Virtue, modesty, fidelity and maternal duty, they have simply dismissed as old-fashioned. Men will always be just as good as women want them to be.'"

Condemning democracy and woman suffrage, an article on "*Feminism*" by Father Lucian Johnston in *The Ecclesiastical Review*, a monthly magazine for priests published by the Catholic University of Washington, D. C., in its issue for December, 1916, rants as follows against democracy for giving women the right to vote:

"Democracy at present does not strike me as any too sane... It is toward Feminists' treatment of marriage and the general philosophical bent of mind that at least the Catholic Church must and will take a hostile attitude."

"So then you have the feminist moral principles stated unblushingly. They are frankly and brutally materialistic and anti-Christian... upon them every libidinous dog has ever fallen as an excuse for his lust... It is bolstered by the usual claptrap about race... So runs this slimy philosophy or ethics of the stable or stud-farm and pig-pen... Follow the majority, even when the majority is wrong. And do so in the name of 'Woman.' This is woman's right."

"But the female suffrage is far more than this. It is part and parcel of a movement which profoundly affects the very foundations of Christian society, the home, marriage, law, order, and the rest. Secondly, I think it is safe to say that the radicals are so far in control of the general movement."

## **Woman In The "Ages Of Faith"**

The Catholic talent for rewriting history to suit its purpose is at its best in depicting medieval life as the golden age of human existence, when everyone was religious, virtuous and gaily carefree. *The Thirteenth, Greatest of Centuries*, by James J. Walsh, has achieved sensational success, but is one of the greatest travesties of truth ever written. Thus it is taken for granted that the glorification of Mary and the development of chivalry raised womanhood to a pinnacle never before or since reached. An occasional educated woman of the wealthy class is made to represent all women in the Middle Ages. A flattering phrase by a far-seeing monk to a wealthy benefactress of the church is made to appear as proof of the church's glorification of all women.

Historical truth paints the picture otherwise; and shows that contempt for women by a celibate priesthood increased in proportion to the growing dominance of the church of Rome. Lecky, in his *History of European Morals* (II, 49), tells us:

"In the 6th century the Catholic church council of Macon was actually discussing whether woman was a human being. This thesis was revised at a later date by Geddicus. According to Bayle in his *Philosophical Dictionary* the doctrine of Geddicus asserted that, 'Nature, which ever aims at perfection, would always produce men, and that, when a woman is born, it is, as it were, a mistake and an error of nature, as when anyone is born blind or lame... Thus woman is an animal produced by accident.'"

This pathological attitude toward woman, borrowed from paganism and

cultivated in the cloister, grew stronger with age. The celebrated historian, G. G. Coulton, in his work, *Ten Medieval Studies* (p. 51), puts it as follows:

"To the strict Franciscans, the other sex existed only as a temptation, permitted by God's inscrutable providence... As Bernard of Besse remarks, after his warning against touching the hands of or kissing even a baby sister: 'I can call that man neither chaste nor honorable who abhors not to touch a woman or to suffer her touch. How should it be lawful to touch that which it is not lawful even to look at?'"

Joseph McCabe, in his book, *The Religion of Women*, explains how the Catholic church withdrew the few privileges formerly granted to women:

"In the 5th century the Councils of the Church began to close the door of the ministry effectually against women. Few deaconesses can be found after that time. One by one the public functions were reserved for the male clergy. Women were forbidden, successively, to teach, to baptize, to preach, to take any ministerial order whatever. Councils of bishops began to dispose of women in a curious fashion... At the Council of Auxerre in 578 the bishops forbade women, on account of their 'impurity,' to take the sacrament in their hands as men did. On every side woman was forced to retire from the position she had won. The dignity which the pagan Stoics had at length granted her was flung to the winds."

Resentment against the female sex went so far as to exclude women from singing in the choirs of the principal churches. Eunuchs were provided instead, and till recent times boys were castrated to supply soprano voices for the Sistine choir in the Vatican.<sup>3</sup> No women are allowed to sing in choirs in St. Peter's or other Roman Catholic cathedrals to this day.

Most degrading of medieval carriage customs was the "right of the first night" (*jus primae noctis*), by which a feudal lord was entitled to spend the first night with every newly married woman among his serfs. The sexual license enjoyed by the higher clergy, who were also feudal lords and therefore entitled to the "right of the first night," was paralleled in the lower clergy by universal concubinage. These conditions are a frightful commentary of the claim of the Catholic church to have raised the standing of women in medieval Europe. Cambridge Medieval History (V.12) says: "By about the beginning of the 11th century, celibacy of the clergy was uncommon, and the laws enforcing it obsolete." And Lecky (*Democracy and Liberty*, II, 179) observes that, "There was a time when clerical marriage was forbidden but when connections not formally legitimate were generally tolerated and recognized, and were sometimes even enforced by parishioners in the interests of public morals."

The effect of clerical concubinage was to lessen the regard of laymen for the married state. Dr. James Donaldson, in his book on Woman, (p. 190) has this to say on the point:

"The less spiritual classes of the people, the laymen, being taught that marriage might be licentious, and that it implied an inferior state of sanctity, were rather inclined to neglect matrimony for more loose

connections.”

Added to this was widespread and legalized prostitution, in which church organizations had a controlling interest.

Woman in Catholic Europe of the Middle Ages was a direct or indirect victim of church law. Her condition was degraded and far inferior to what it had been in pagan times. The *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (XV, 444) states:

“As Christianity became dominant throughout Europe, women were deprived of that freedom which they had attained in pagan Rome and had enjoyed to some extent under AngloSaxon law... women and especially wives occupied a position of abject dependence.

“A few exceptional women participated in the meager cultural activity and in philanthropic undertakings through their work in nunneries, but the position of women both in custom and in law was degraded.”

*Encyclopaedia Britannica* (XXVIII, 783) has this to say:

“Canon Law, looking with disfavor on the female independence prevailing in the later Roman law, tended rather in the opposite direction. The Decretum specially inculcated subjection of the . wife to the husband, and obedience to him in all things... In some court cases the evidence of women was not receivable.”

Lecky in his *History of European Morals* (II, 339) points out that, “Wherever Canon Law was made the basis of legislation, we find ‘laws of succession’ sacrificing the interests of daughters and wives, and a state of public opinion which has been formed and regulated by, these laws.”

## **The Virgin Mary And Chivalry**

Catholic propagandists, have so ceaselessly repeated their contention that the veneration shown to Mary elevated woman to a new dignity, that it is now generally accepted as true. Overlooked is the fact that the virtual deification of the Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages made her a sexless being, utterly removed from earthly things, and left her nothing in common with ordinary women. To this day, she is prayed to for redemption and salvation, and there her practical relationship with ordinary women ends.

In fact, the cult of Mary has never been an obstacle in the Catholic church to contempt for women in general, and cruelty to wives in particular. In volume I, p. 174, of his *Five Centuries of Religion*, G. G. Coulton reports his findings on this topic as follows:

“The cult of the Virgin probably did a little indirectly to raise the status of women; but the claims usually made in this direction are not, so far as I know, borne out by any documentary evidence, and, on their very face, are grossly exaggerated... The Knight of Tour-Landry wrote in the heyday of Mary worship, and to him wife-beating was a matter of course even in good society. “The woman-worship of the troubadours is admittedly leavened with pitiful

unrealities, and, such as it is, it probably owes at least as much to imitation of the politer Arabs of Spain as to the cult of the Virgin. To chastise one's wife was not only customary, not only expressly permitted by the statutes of some towns, but even formally granted to the husband by Canon Law" (as in Gratian's *Decreta*).

After all, Madonna-Worship is not confined to Roman Catholicism. There was Maya, the virgin-mother of Buddha; and Isis, mother of the Egyptian god Horus, who was called "Our Lady" and "Queen of Heaven" the same as Mary is today in the Roman Catholic church. In Babylon there was Ishtar, described as "The Lady of the Heavenly Crown, the Mother of the Gods." These cults produced no betterment in the status of women. Why therefore expect any revolutionary changes because of a like cult in Roman Catholicism!

Likewise medieval chivalry is largely a lot of romantic nonsense. It is no proof, as Catholic propagandists would have us believe, of the dignity acquired by women under Catholic church control. No, army in history has a worse reputation for raping women than the Mary-worshiping knights who led the later crusades. In the third volume (p. 399) of his work on *Europe During the Middle Ages*, Prof. Hallam says:

"The morals of chivalry were not pure. In the amusing fiction that seems to have been the only popular reading in the Middle Ages there reigns a licentious spirit... indicating a general dissoluteness in the relation of the sexes. An accomplished knight seems to have enjoyed as undoubted prerogatives with women, by general consent of opinion, as were claimed by the corrupt courtiers of Louis XV."

### The Church And Women Today

Has the Catholic church in modern times changed its attitude toward women? In democratic countries, where the Catholic church is forced to compete with Protestant progress, it is obliged to tolerate the education of women, and their newly-won rights to vote and even administer high positions in government. Not so in countries where the Catholic church is dominant. As regards the education of women in the typically Catholic countries of Spain and Portugal, a report of the United States Education Bureau states:<sup>4</sup>

"The general consensus of opinion has been, in the Iberian peninsula, that an elementary education and certain accomplishments were about all that young girl's need. Until a late date there have been no laws admitting women to university privileges in either Spain or Portugal."

In Catholic countries of Eastern Europe conditions have been worse. In Latin America women not only lack higher education and the right to vote, but live in passive submission to the absolute rule of their husbands. The double standard of morality – one for men and one for women – is taken for granted, and prostitution is rampant. In the January 27 issue, of the Wilmington, Delaware, *Sunday Star* of this year, Mother Agatha, an Ursuline nun who writes a regular column in that newspaper, glamorizes the present status of woman in Latin-American countries as follows:

"She lives an entirely passive, receptive, emotional life, from which she draws a sense of security. Thus linked to man's personality, destinies and prestige, woman is content to play a role secondary to his. Her life is completely subordinated to his... It is natural that the Colombian woman should shrug her shoulders at the American woman's remark about feminism, voting, and the rest.

"The Latin-American woman is perfectly happy without the social and political rights enjoyed by American women."

This paraphrases the dictum of the late Cardinal Verdier of Paris on the status of women in the Catholic church:

"By marriage a woman takes a place in an hierarchical society. In this society God, who established marriage, has willed that the husband shall be the head of the family, and that the wife shall be his companion, like to him indeed, but subject to him."

In Catholic Quebec, Canada, much of the old French Civic Code on marriage remains. When a French-Canadian woman marries, she loses all legal status. Her property is placed at the arbitrary disposal of her husband; she cannot even collect on her own insurance policy without her husband's consent. Her husband, under the guidance of the church, has the sole right to say whether or not his wife shall undergo any surgical operation.

The coming of Fascism gave hope to the Roman Catholic church for the restoration of its traditional attitude toward women and its enforcement on society by dictatorial decrees. Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical "On Christian Marriage," (1930), enthusiastically refers to and quotes from his recent Lateran Pact with Mussolini (in 1929) that, "in consonance with right order and entirely according to the law of Christ, in the solemn Concordat happily entered into between the Holy See and the Kingdom of Italy, also in matrimonial affairs a peaceful settlement and friendly cooperation has been obtained, such as befitted the glorious history of the Italian people, and its ancient and sacred traditions. These decrees are to be found in the Lateran Pact."

In this same encyclical Pius XI quotes and endorses Pope Leo XIII on the subservience of woman to man, as follows: "The man is the ruler of the family, and the head of the woman; but because she is flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, let her be subject and obedient to the man."

Outstanding Catholic leaders, even those reputed as pro-democratic, such as the late English Cardinal Hinsley, praised Fascism for its "manly virtues" and its decrees relegating women again to the duties of "children, church and kitchen."

It should surprise no one therefore, that the Catholic church in America is adamantly opposed to equal rights for women, and makes every effort in Washington to defeat the proposed "Equal Rights Amendment" to the Constitution. Following is a sample of the pressure exerted on Congress in this matter. It was written to Representative William T. Byrne by Charles J. Tobin, secretary of the New York State Catholic Welfare Committee, on October

2, 1943, from its offices at 162 State Street, Albany, N. Y.:

"Dear Bill:

The National Catholic Welfare Council, speaking for the Catholic Bishops of the country, have protested the passage by Congress of the so-called 'Equal Rights for Women Proposal,' now before the Judiciary Committee, of the House.

His Excellency, Bishop Gibbons of this Diocese, asks your good offices to aid the National Catholic Welfare Council in their protest.

Very sincerely,

(Signed) Charles J. Tobin, Secretary."

This letter caused the recipient and two other Catholic members of Congress to change their pledged votes in order to conform to the instructions of Bishop Gibbons.

Equal rights in the spiritual order, regardless of sex or condition, is a fundamental principle of true Christian teaching, and was re-introduced to the world at the time of the Protestant Reformation, according to Paul in Gal. 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

God is no respecter of persons or sex differences. To each and all He offers His gift of salvation – free and full. From this spiritual principle of equality, as taught by all Protestant churches, flow equal rights in the social order for women and men alike, as is evidenced in countries where the Gospel of Christ has been freely preached.

Such equality, in spiritual and social matters, however, does not tend to sustain an ecclesiastical organization like the Roman Catholic church, whose hierarchical structure is essential for its maintenance, and whose choice privileges are reserved only for those of its administrative personnel – all of whom are men.

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1. In the U. S. this ceremony is generally allowed inside the church proper.↵
  2. See Letter XXII in Select Letters of Saint Jerome, p. 67, In the Loeb Classical Library.↵
  3. Cf. Christianity and Morals, p. 339, by Prof. Edward 'A, Westermarck.↵
  4. Report of the Commissioner of Education for 1894-95, Vol. I, Part I, p. 940.↵

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